

Indiana House of Representatives

News and Information

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STATEHOUSE REPORT FROM REP. DAVE CROOKS

INDIANAPOLIS – The first phase of the 2006 session of the Indiana General Assembly has come to a close, and it is time to review what has taken place to this point.

On Thursday (February 2), Indiana House members wrapped up work on bills that started in that chamber. The past two weeks have seen us debating and voting on more than 100 measures in floor sessions that often have lasted until midnight. Before we move to the next part of the legislative process, I want to look at some of the highlights of the first month of the session.

Everything begins with Major Moves, the governor's plan to sell the Indiana Toll Road for 75 years to private foreign investors for \$3.85 billion to generate the revenue needed to pay for major road and bridge projects. This proposal, contained in House Bill 1008, was approved on a party-line vote.

I opposed Major Moves, but not because I disagree with the need to improve Indiana's infrastructure. I don't believe selling the toll road to foreign investors for 75 years is a sound financial decision. I would have preferred that we use a proposal that would bond toll increases already proposed by the governor and use future federal revenues to issue Garvee Bonds. This plan would sell bonds for a term of 20 years and generate around \$2 billion for road projects, without losing control of the toll road. However, that idea was voted down on a party-line vote.

I have grave concerns that Major Moves contains land mines that will cause problems down the road. I worry that the state will carry a large financial responsibility in the event that the investors default. There is no guarantee that workers on the projects financed by Major Moves will receive competitive wages and benefits. I also wonder if this is the first step in selling off many of our state's assets, including our parks and hospitals, and programs that provide health care and other critical services for Hoosiers.

The best way to get the answers to these questions would have been to give the people of Indiana time to examine the proposal in public hearings. Last Monday, I met with Gov. Daniels in the hope of convincing him to allow a few weeks to conduct statewide hearings to inform Hoosiers of this new concept.

I feel this proposal is so complicated and revolutionary that it would be in the best interest of the state to separate this issue from the current short session. Once the public hearings were complete, we could conduct a mini special session to carefully debate this concept. I believe we could achieve this before May 1. I presented my idea to the governor because I have received hundreds of calls, letters and e-mails from throughout the district. They have told me they are very skeptical of allowing any company to take control of a state asset, especially for 75 years or more.

This short session is the busiest I've seen in my 10 years in the General Assembly. With so many proposals already on our plate, I believe it's irresponsible for legislators to rush this Major Moves proposal through when most members have not had the time to carefully review and understand nearly 400 pages of legislation and contract language.

However, the governor told me he did not believe more public feedback was necessary. My amendment was defeated on a strict party-line vote. HB 1008 was sent to the Senate, where it's expected to pass in the next few days. I hope you understand I'm simply trying to protect your interest, and the interest of future generations of Hoosiers.

It was very disappointing that the House majority also declined to do anything to respond to the public's ongoing concerns about time zones in Indiana. Leaders rejected my proposal that would give the people of this state a chance to decide in a public referendum whether Indiana should be in the Eastern or Central Time Zone. I still believe the only way to solve this mess is to allow people across the state to vote on a more unified time zone.

I will continue to fight to advance this proposal in the remaining days of the session since the U.S. Department of Transportation did not follow the request in legislation passed last year to conduct statewide hearings on creating a more unified time zone for our state.

Property tax relief was identified as this session's major priority by all House members. House Bill 1001 offers nearly \$150 million in property tax breaks, but identifies no way to pay for them. The bill provides one-time tax credits for homeowners this year, and there would be caps on rate increases for residential property, although those caps would not include levies for debt services and schools.

The relief contained in HB 1001 will do little to offset the double-digit property tax increases that home and business owners will see from the 2005-06 biennial state budget approved by last year's Legislature, a budget I voted against. I wish we had spent more time on property tax relief last year, because it would have helped property owners this year.

The move to restrict eminent domain gained popularity after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled governments can use the process to take private property for private economic development projects. HB 1010 would allow eminent domain to be used only as a last resort, but the bill exempts the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT), which means the state could use this provision to grab property for some of the public-private partnerships proposed by the governor.

In education, I opposed a measure to move the ISTEP skills test from the fall of the school year to the spring (HB 1240). Superintendent of Public Instruction Suellen Reed says the move will cost taxpayers \$45 million.

With action on House bills complete, we now begin work on legislation sent to our chamber from the Indiana Senate. In next week's Report, I will review some of the bills that will occupy our attention in the next several weeks.

If you need to reach me during the 2006 session, you can call using the toll-free Statehouse telephone number of 1-800-382-9842, e-mail me through my Internet web site at www.IN.gov/H63 or write to me in care of the Indiana House of Representatives, 200 W. Washington St., Indianapolis, IN 46204.

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